

“Theory” (free standing) in the arts, humanities, and what Europeans tend to call human sciences, tends to stand for a certain method or approach in a field. The contrast might be “History” or “quantitative analysis.” Historians are not just found in History departments. In some areas this seems to matter a lot: art history often distinguishes itself from art theory, art criticism, or art practice.

Following the appearance of structuralism and post-structuralism in North American academe in the 1960s, “doing theory” tended to be seen as one option and a sometimes desirable specialty in the downsizing of higher ed in the 1970s. Fashionable? Yes, often. Something every grad student needed to know something about? Yes, definitely.

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